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Parmenides's Apophatic Argument

In 11.8: 2-4, Parmenides says, “*what-is* is ungenerated and imperishable, whole, unique, steadfast, and complete.” It follows that the Cosmos, as *what-physically-is*, has all these attributes. (It could also be the case that some other noumena has these attributes, but I will not pursue this interpretation here.) This could be the start of a robust definition of the Cosmos, but Parmenides pivots and seeks to define *what-is* negatively. He does this by attempting to define what *what-is-not* is, before concluding that he cannot say what *what-is-not* is because he cannot say that *what-is-not* exists.. I will here explain what attributes Parmenides takes the Cosmos to have because of the inconceivability of *what-is-not*, but, first, I will describe why this is so hard to explain.

Parmenides's argument is apophatic: it proceeds from premises that are explicitly not stated by the speaker. It is sometimes called a negative argument because the premises that are not stated are established by premises about those premises. Before explaining what the Cosmos is like, Parmenides establishes a single premise. This is that, “you cannot know what is not (for it cannot be accomplished) nor can you declare it” (11.2: 7-8). So, not only does *what-is-not* not exist, it cannot be spoken of. This makes Parmenides's argument from *what-is-not*'s qualities harder, since he can't even talk about its absence of qualities. He proceeds by defining what *what-is* is not as an apophatic way of defining what it is. I take him to be speaking of *what-physically-is*, as this seems to me to be the conclusion that follows most clearly from inference.

This indirectness gives us particular difficulty when we attempt a physical reading, as we are inclined to confuse *what-is-not* with the *space-between-things*, or *void*. For the purposes of understanding Parmenides's argument, however, it is necessary to consider the space between

things to be some thing itself, and, thus, part of the thing that encompasses everything. Parts of *what-is* can only be divided by *what-is* (*what-is-not* is not, so it cannot “be” between or outside of *what-is*) so *anything* that is is part of *everything* that is; *everything-that-is* is the *Cosmos*. we encounter the problem of division, though; if the space between things is also something, is there really a *between-things*? Parmenides answers that there is not; if there were *nothing* between two things, they would be the same, undifferentiated thing (two bodies of water with *nothing* between them are actually one body of water). So-called divisions of the *Cosmos* are only figures of speech. For example, I refer to separate *things* in this paper, but only in the lower-case sense; the *Cosmos* is the only *Thing*.

Note, however, that besides rejecting division within *what-is*, Parmenides also rejects the division between *what-is* and *what-is-not*, as discussing such a division would necessarily entail discussing *what-is-not*. This makes it difficult for interpreters to discuss his work without reading into it something he deliberately left out. The division between *what-is* and *what-is-not* would make an easy, traditional argument, but Parmenides takes the altogether harder route of discussing *what-is* explicitly on his own terms as a monolithic, all-encompassing *Thing*. His argument is subtle, and interpreters must largely infer meaning from the fragments.

Eventually, though, the very existence of the *Cosmos*—its most obvious trait, as well as the one that can most obviously be inferred from *what-is-not*'s non-existence—makes all its other characteristics necessary. The being of the *Cosmos* and the not-being of the *not-Cosmos* (*what-is-not*) imply all the other traits of the *Cosmos*, which follow in the next paragraph.

The traits that Parmenides ascribes to the *Cosmos* are: “ungenerated...imperishable, whole, unique, steadfast, and complete” (11.8: 3-4). I will describe why these all follow from his account of the *Cosmos* as *what-is* and not *what-is-not*, keeping in mind the particular difficulties

that his argument creates. I will refer back only to the premise established in 11.2: 7-8: that “you cannot know what is not (for it cannot be accomplished) nor can you declare it.” Everything else should follow logically. Where necessary, I will point to other sections of Parmenides’s fragments wherein he makes parallel arguments about qualities more explicitly.

First, Parmenides states that the *Cosmos* is ungenerated. The *Cosmos* is ungenerated because *what-is* cannot, logically, have come from *what-is-not*, as *what-is-not* is not; thus, *what-is* must have come from something else that exists if it came from anything else at all, which must, itself, be part of *what-is*. (We will see, when we discuss the *Cosmos* as “whole”, that something being a part of *what-is* makes it, itself, *what-is*.)

Second, Parmenides states that the *Cosmos* is imperishable. This follows from the *Cosmos* being ungenerated, as the *Cosmos*, being *what-is*, could only perish by becoming *what-is-not*; *what-is* becoming *what-is-not*, however, is just as impossible as *what-is-not* becoming *what-is*. Such a transformation is inconceivable, and thus impossible. I will note that, together with the *Cosmos*’s nature as something ungenerated, its nature as something imperishable makes it eternal, without beginning or end. This may sound inconceivable, but, given that Parmenides has already established the impossibility of *what-is-not* existing, the *Cosmos* having any other nature is what is really inconceivable.

Third, Parmenides states that the *Cosmos* is whole. This is because nothing could divide it but itself, and a thing being between itself and itself is an absurdity. We may consider the possibility that *what-is* could be divided by *what-is-not*, but only to reject it; if there is *nothing* between two things, they would not be two things, but one thing. Therefore, *what-is-not* is not the same as *Void*—the space between atoms—and why any so-called part of the *Cosmos* must

itself be the *Cosmos*. The *Cosmos*, being whole, is undifferentiated except in human imagination (which is not identical to physical existence).

Fourth, Parmenides states that the *Cosmos* is unique. It could be argued that this is implied by its separateness from *what-is-not*, but that would involve discussing *what-is-not* as *something-that-is*, which Parmenides deliberately avoids doing. Instead, I argue that the *Cosmos*'s uniqueness is implied by its wholeness in time—as it occupies all time, being ungenerated and imperishable—and in space—as it is whole. Filling, then, all time and space—and, possibly, expanding as time and space expand—there could only be one *Cosmos*. Another *Cosmos-that-is* would also be part of *what-is* in time and space, and thus of the *Cosmos*. As the *Cosmos* is whole, this greater *Cosmos* could not really be divided into lesser *Cosmoses*, which is why there could only be one of it.

Fifth, Parmenides states that the *Cosmos* is steadfast. This means it does not change, which is, considering our everyday observations of it, confusing. However, considering the *Cosmos* to be whole, we must recognize that is whole in both space—as covered in the previous paragraph—and time—as covered in the paragraph before that one. If we reject division, as Parmenides does, as a human artifice and not a physical feature of the *Cosmos*, we must recognize that we cannot divide the *Cosmos* in time any more than we can in space. This would create multiple *Cosmoses*, which is impossible. This means that change—which is a difference in the *Cosmos* in different times—is impossible. The *Cosmos*, ungenerated and imperishable, exists at all times at once.

Sixth, and finally, Parmenides states that the *Cosmos* is complete. This follows largely from the *Cosmos* being whole—that is, not having parts added to or taken away from it—but it has a greater significance. If the *Cosmos* is complete, then it cannot become more or less than

what it is. Change and division are impossible. From Parmenides's account, a picture emerges of the *Cosmos* as an all-encompassing, monolithic entity. Denying motion and change, Parmenides treats *what-is* as *all-that-is* and *all-that-can-be*, embracing a radical physical monism. Everything is the *Cosmos*, everywhere, in all times. There cannot be anything else.